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# The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Spink County

W. F. Kumlien

C. Scandrette

Raymond Hatch

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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in the Elementary Schools  
of Spink County

W. F. Kumlien  
C. Scandrette  
Raymond Hatch



In 1920 the average rural school enrollment was 15 pupils



but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 9 pupils

Department of Rural Sociology  
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of  
Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Spink county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 665-74-3-143. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Eva Sumner, the Spink County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study was secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

\* \* \* \* \*

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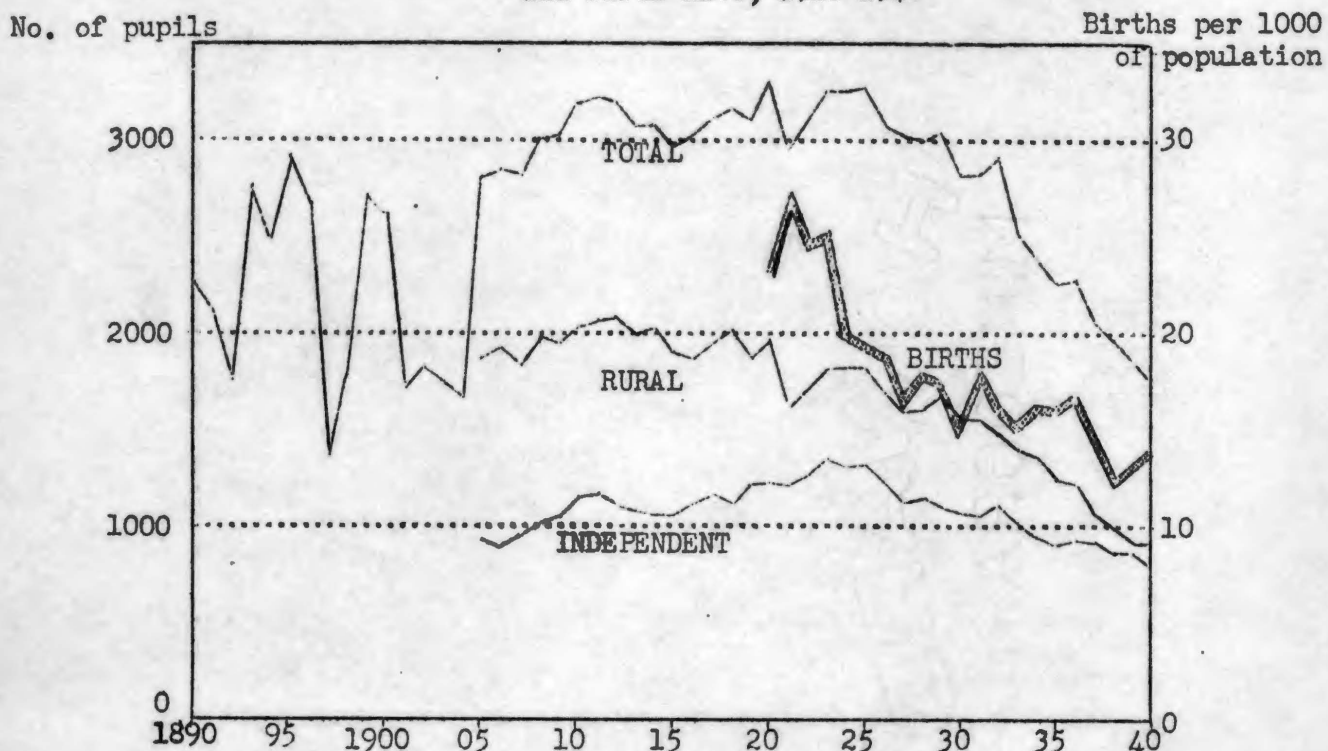
## The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Spink County

For a number of years population experts have called attention to the widespread decline in the birth rate, and have foreseen as an early and serious outgrowth a sharp curtailment of elementary school enrollments.

The reliability of this prediction as applied to Spink county is demonstrated in Figure 1. Enrollment in the elementary schools of the county reached its peak in 1920 with a total of 3,317 pupils. Since 1925 an abrupt and almost uninterrupted decline has been operating with the result that enrollments by 1940 had dropped to 1,816 pupils--or 45.3 percent below the 1920 figure. As may be seen in Figure 1, rural enrollments have declined most rapidly, although enrollments in independent schools have likewise suffered sizeable losses.

The trend in the Spink county birth rate, 1920 to 1940, is also plotted in Figure 1. It is of importance to note that its rate of decline closely approximates the enrollment decrease during the same period. From a high of 27.4 births per 1000 of the population in 1921, the number dropped more than fifty percent to 12.6 in 1938. The inevitable result of this downward trend has been an appreciable falling off in the number of children who arrive at school age.

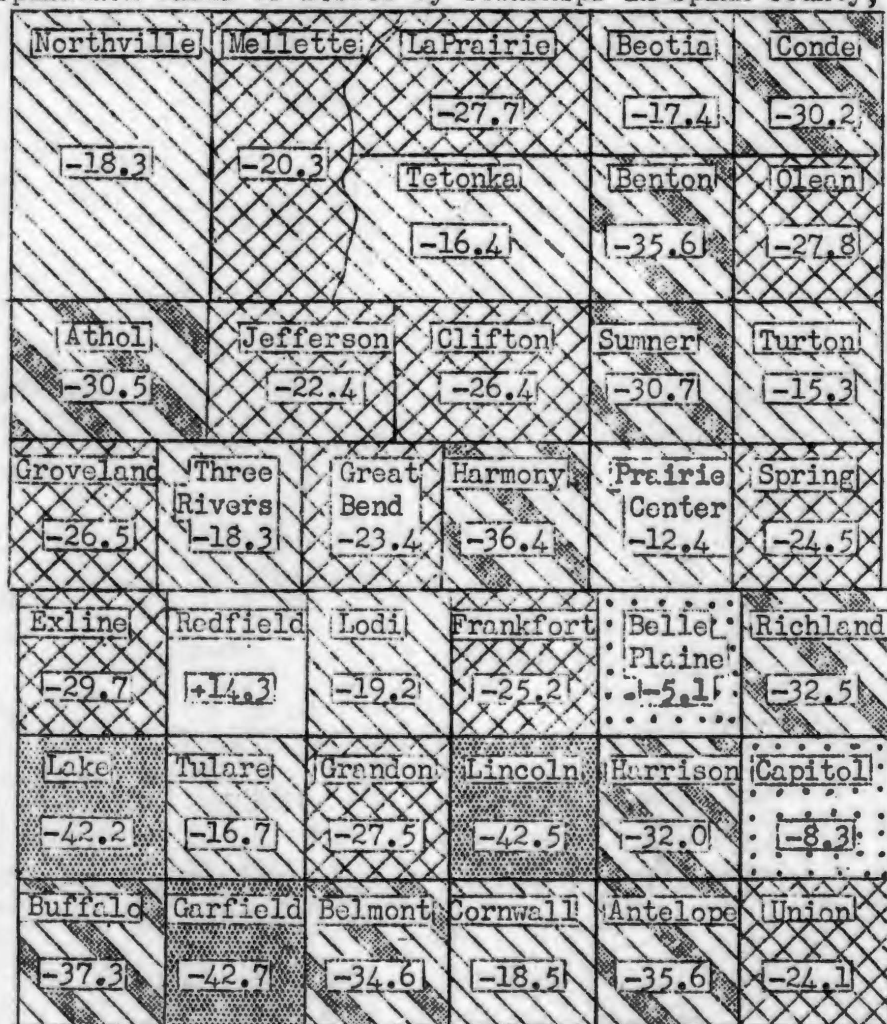
Figure 1. Trends in the Spink County Elementary School Enrollments, 1890-1940, and Birth Rate, 1920-1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health



Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses by Townships in Spink County, 1930 - 1940.



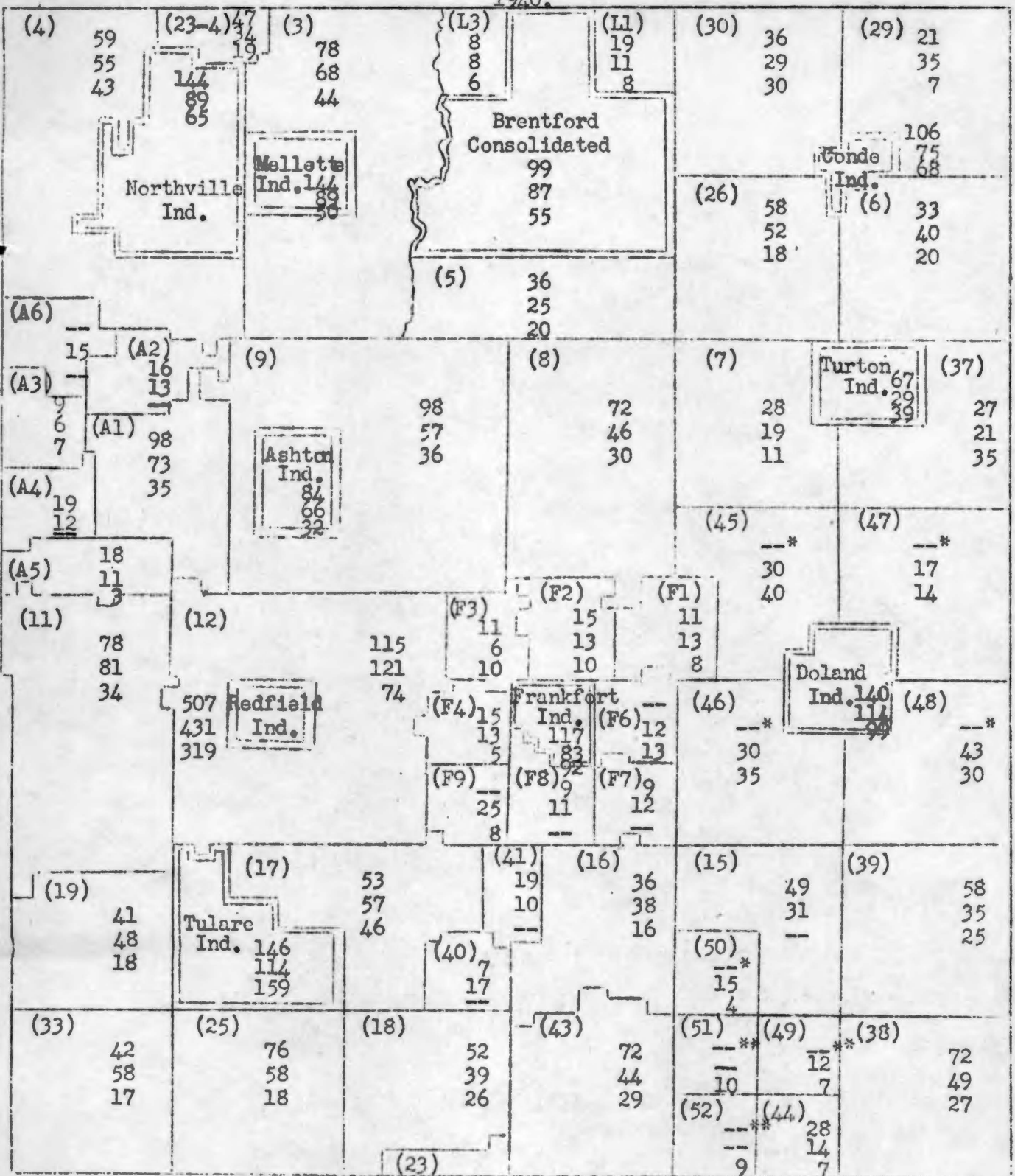
Legend: Gained in Population 10.0 - 19.9% 30.0 - 39.9%  
 0.0 - 9.9% 20.0 - 29.9% 40.0 - 49.9%

Source: Preliminary Releases of the U. S. Census, 1940.

Supplementing the drop in the birth rate as a factor in the Spink county enrollment decline has been a substantial loss of population through outward migration. During the decade 1930-1940 the population of Spink county was reduced by 18.1 percent, falling from 15,304 in 1930 to 12,527 in 1940. Both town and open country areas have been affected by the outward flow of population although the losses have been somewhat more pronounced in the open country. The total population of the ten incorporated towns and villages of the county dropped from 5,739 in 1930 to 5,080 in 1940, with Doland alone showing a slight increase.

Figure 2 shows the extent of the losses in the farm population in townships of Spink county, 1930 to 1940. Of the 37 townships Redfield was the only one which reported an increase during this period, while losses in 13 others exceeded 30 percent. It is of interest to note the direct relationship which exists between population losses and enrollment declines. In the four townships which suffered the heaviest depopulation, elementary enrollments dropped off 65.8 percent, as compared with only 19.4 percent in the four townships showing the least tendency toward population decrease. It appears that the downward trend in elementary enrollments--a nearly universal phenomenon growing out of the general reduction in the birth rate--has been considerably hastened and intensified in Spink county through migration, particularly from rural-farm areas.

Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in Spink County School Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940.



Legend: Top figure - 1920 enrollment  
Middle figure - 1930 enrollment  
Lower figure - 1940 enrollment

Source: Records of Spink County Superintendent of Schools

\* Districts 45, 46, 47 and 48 comprised Doland district in 1920, with a total enrollment of 132 pupils.

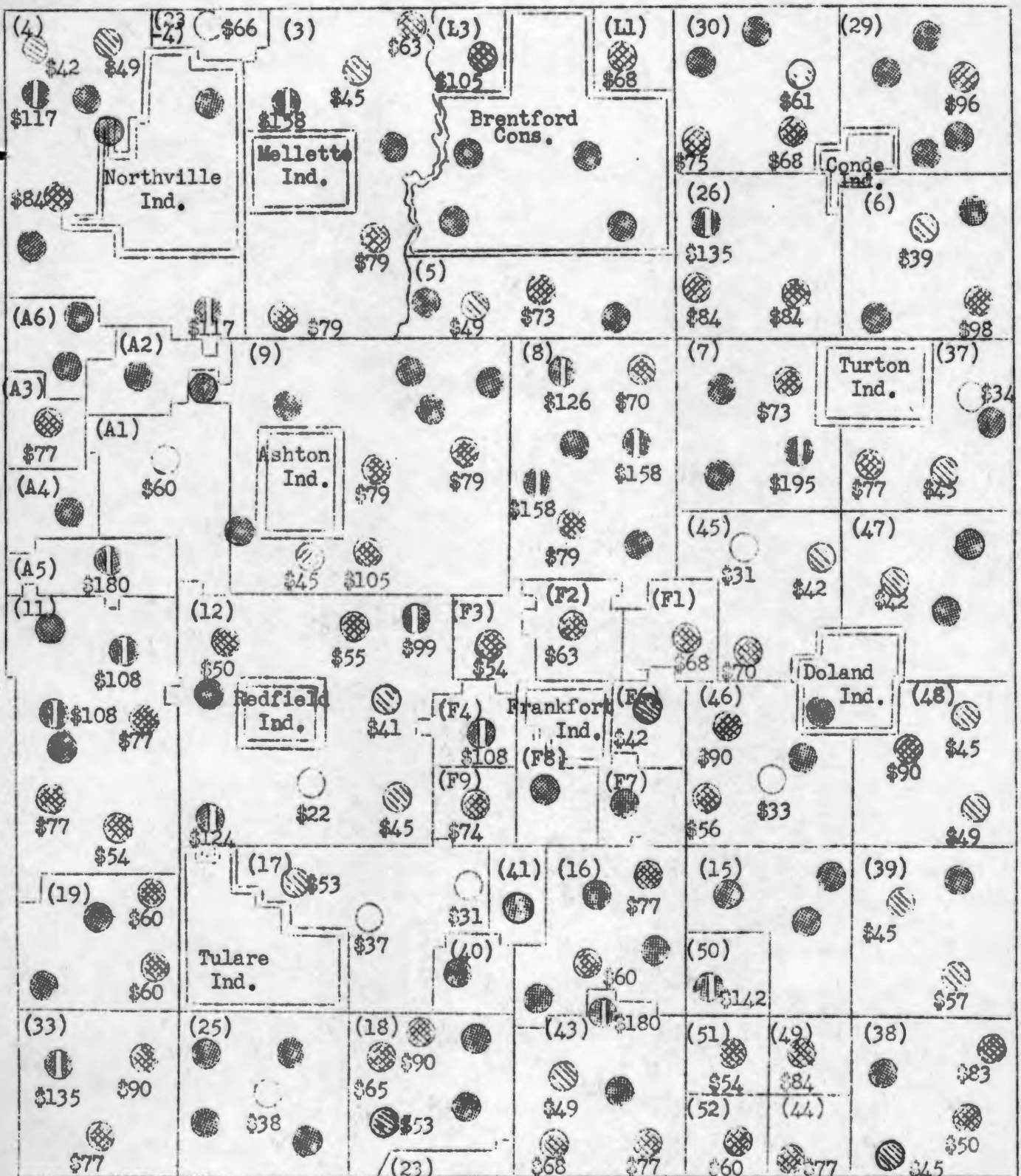
\*\* Enrollments for districts 49, 50, 51 and 52 were included in that for district 44 in 1920.

In 1940, 52 common school districts, 9 independent districts and 1 consolidated district were operating in Spink county. As in most counties in central South Dakota, the common districts are predominantly of the large, several-school type whose boundaries correspond to township lines (some are even more extensive in area). A few scattered districts of the county, however, are of the small, one-school type which one would expect to find in more densely settled regions.

Figure 3 shows the elementary enrollments in each district of Spink county for 1920, 1930 and 1940. It will be noted that with few exceptions enrollments have shown a downward tendency, particularly between 1930 and 1940. No fewer than 62 common schools had been closed by 1940, while enrollments in 17 others were at the extremely low level of five or fewer pupils. Fifty additional schools were operating with limited enrollments of 6 to 10 pupils; 21 enrolled 11 to 15 pupils; while enrollments in nine schools exceeded 15 pupils. In spite of the increase in the number of closed schools, the average enrollment in all common schools in operation has dropped steadily from 15 in 1920 to 12 in 1930 and little more than 9 in 1940.



Figure 4. Elementary Enrollments and Instructional Cost Per Pupil in Common Schools of Spink County.



Legend: ● Closed school ● 1 - 5 pupils ● 6 - 10 pupils  
 ● 11 - 15 pupils ○ 16 or more pupils

The figure below each school site is the cost per pupil.

Source: Records of the Spink County Superintendent of Schools

As might be expected in view of the differences in size of enrollment, considerable variation is found among common schools of Spink county in instructional costs per pupil. In general, the schools with the smallest enrollments had the highest per pupil outlays. Costs per pupil ranged from \$22 in Nash school, Redfield district, where 23 pupils were enrolled, to \$195 in Klappericks school, Sumner district, which had an enrollment of only three pupils.

Table I (below) shows the total costs and average costs per pupil in common schools of Spink grouped according to size of enrollments. It is clearly evident that the operation of schools for five or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. The average for the 17 schools in this group was \$133.50, as compared with \$40.51 for schools enrolling 16 or more pupils. Costs were also high for schools with but 6 to 10 pupils--\$71.75. The average for all schools was \$63.23 per pupil.

Table I. Costs of Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Spink County, 1940.\*

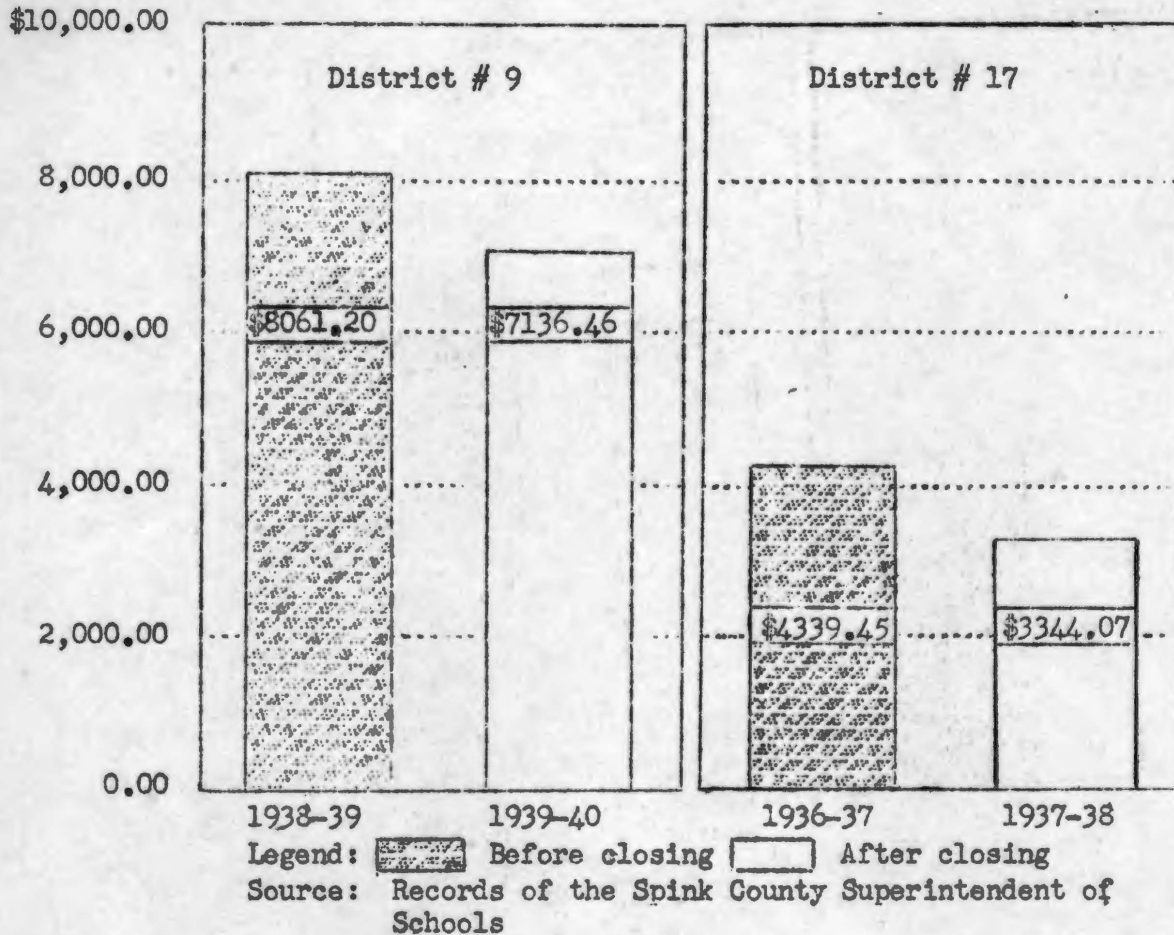
Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	159	912	\$57,662.00	\$ 63.23
Closed	62	---	---	---
1 - 5 pupils	17	72	9,612.00	133.50
6 - 10 pupils	50	397	28,585.00	71.75
11 - 15 pupils	21	258	11,970.00	46.40
16 pupils or more	9	185	7,495.00	40.51

\*Based on teachers' salaries only.

Source: Records of Spink County Superintendent of Schools.



Figure 5. Costs of Elementary Education in Two Spink County Districts Before and After Closing One or More Rural Schools.

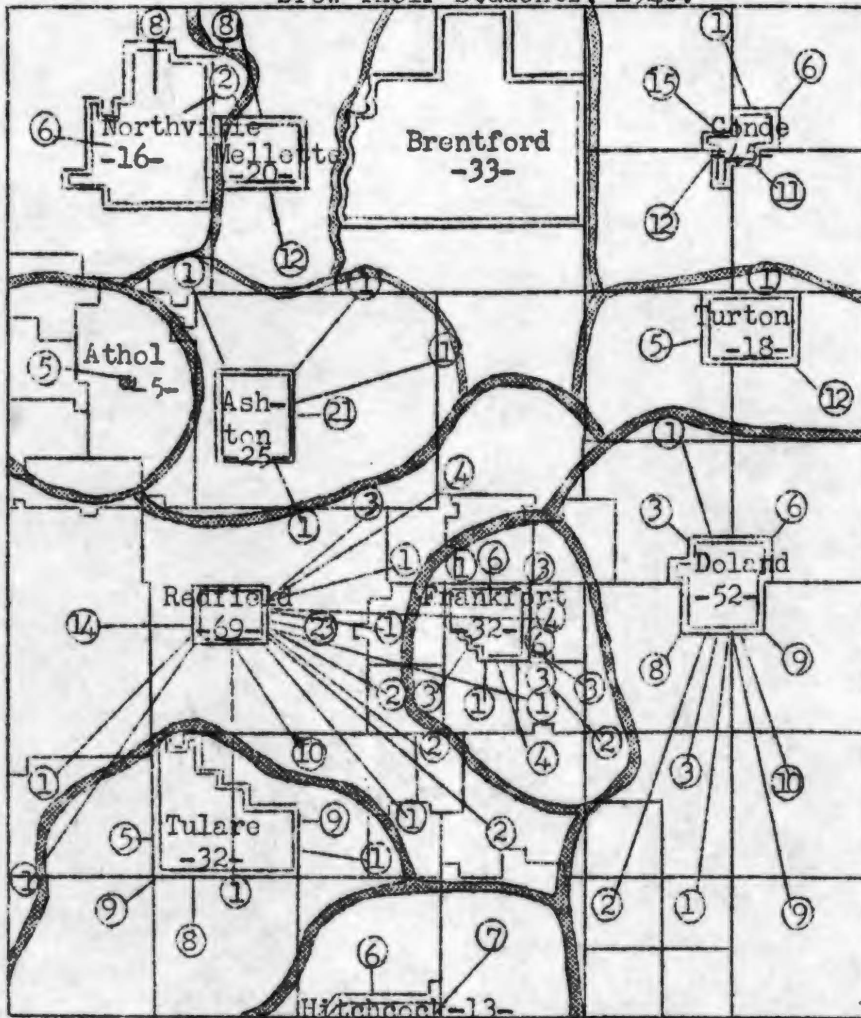


As indicated by the large number of closed schools in Spink county (see Figure 4), many districts have found it expedient to cease operating one or more of their schools when confronted by enrollment shrinkage. Total costs before and after the closing of schools in two of these districts are compared in Figure 5.

During the 1938-39 term, District 9 operated six schools with a combined enrollment of 38 pupils at a total cost of \$8061.20. Two schools were closed by the following year, and the total costs of maintaining the four remaining schools with their 36 pupils was \$7136.46. Four schools were being operated in District 17 in 1936-37, with an enrollment of 50 pupils and an aggregate cost of \$4339.45. In 1937-38, one school was closed because of an enrollment decrease to 42 pupils, and the total costs dropped to \$3344.07. The net savings in Districts 9 and 17 during the first year after the closing of their schools were thus \$924.74 and \$995.38, respectively.

It would seem advisable for common school districts to continue their policy of closing schools whose enrollments drop below the level of economic operation. Since a considerable number of schools enrolled only five or fewer pupils in 1940, further school closures will likely occur during the next few years.

Figure 6. Open Country Areas in Spink County from which High Schools Drew Their Students, 1940.

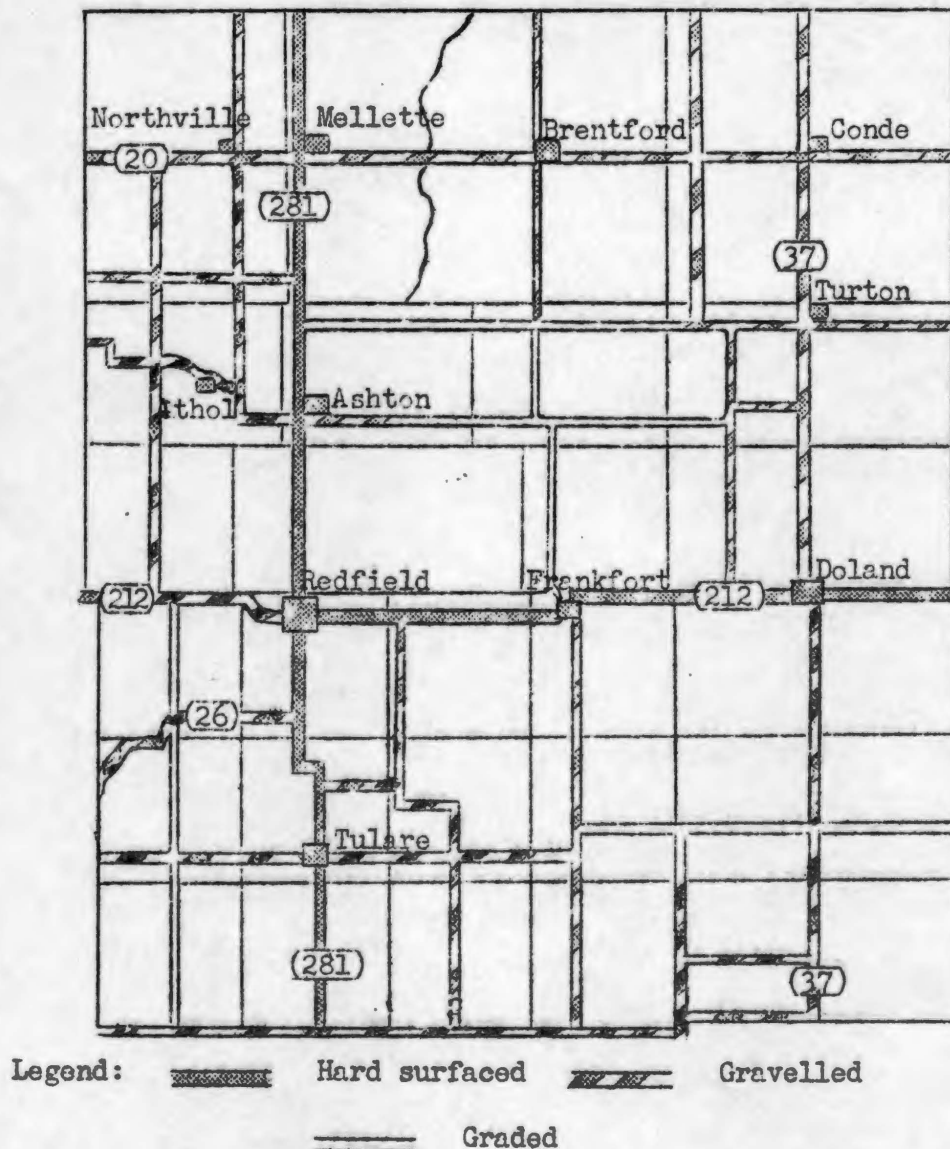


Source: Records of High School Superintendents

Since 1921 it has been compulsory for a district having no secondary school of its own to pay the tuition costs for those students who attend high schools outside the district. This plan has met with widespread acceptance by Spink county school districts, whose boards realize that costs of operating separate high schools for their few students would be prohibitive. In 1940, more than three hundred young people from rural areas of the county were enrolled as tuition students in town and village high schools. Figure 6 shows the areas from which each high school drew its students.

This method of handling the high school situation suggests a possible ultimate solution to the problem of declining elementary enrollments. In view of the shrinking enrollments and mounting costs per pupil, does it not seem practical for common districts to close their schools and to send their remaining pupils to town schools, much as the high school students are now being handled? In spite of added costs for tuition and transportation, considerable savings would likely result. A further advantage would be that of extending the superior facilities of the town school to children from rural-farm areas. Since most of the common districts in Spink county are large enough to maintain at least one school, the immediate measure may involve the closing of all but one or more centrally located schools to which all pupils in the district might be sent. It may be only a matter of time before town-centered community education areas will evolve along lines similar to the high school attendance areas shown above.

Figure 7. Highway System in Spink County, 1941



Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission, 1941.

As will be noted in Figure 7, improved roads are found in every township of Spink county. The automobiles and good roads have brought about a number of fundamental changes in rural life. Not the least of these has been the increased accessibility of town and village centers to farmers and their families.

Because of the increased ease of transportation, many services once performed on a neighborhood basis by open country institutions have been shifted to the trade centers which are assuming the role of service stations for their surrounding country areas. The farmer now goes to the village to buy groceries, machinery, clothing and other articles for the farm and home; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to participate in group meetings and social activities. His sons and daughters, as previously noted, attend the village high school. The next step in the concentration of services in town and village centers of Spink county—one which may be hastened by such factors as dwindling enrollments and exorbitant costs per pupil—may be that of sending the farmer's younger children to the village elementary school.



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How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully  
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

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School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.

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